

Heath Watenmaker
Patient Vignette

As part of my work at the Skirball Hospice this summer, I was tasked with making bereavement exit counseling phone calls to people who were about to come off of their year of bereavement services with the hospice. As I reflect on my summer experience as a whole, some of those phone calls actually made a significant impact on my personal and professional development. On one call, I spoke with a gentleman in his mid-80s, whose wife had died about a year prior to my call. (By sheer coincidence, I had actually co-officiated his wife's funeral the previous summer, as part of my synagogue internship.) When he answered the phone, I introduced myself, and said, "I'm calling to check in to see how you are doing, as it's been about a year since your wife's death." His reply caught me off guard. He responded kindly, but asked, "So what is it that you'd like to talk about?" I thought I had made it clear - but I realized in that moment that the way I framed my phone call did not actually ask any direct questions. Reflecting on it later, I noticed that this is something I do frequently - I describe the conversation I want to have, but don't usually get around to actually having that conversation. As this patient asked his question, I was able to reframe my initial comment into a question - "I know it's been about a year since your wife's death - how are you doing? What's your life like?" Those were questions he was perfectly able and willing to answer. In the course of our conversation, I learned about his many years together with his wife, about some of the obstacles he had faced in grieving for her, and how his family had provided substantial emotional support. He also spoke of the important role that Rabbi Ettman had played in his grief process.